Socially Engaged Art History and Beyond:
Alternative Approaches to the Theory and Practice of Art History

Cultivating an Engaged Art History from Interdisciplinary Roots

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By grafting the branches of one plant onto the rootstock of another, horticulturalists can repair wounded plants, create trees that bear fruit more quickly, and cultivate heartier varieties that thrive in unfavorable conditions. Similarly, if engaged art history is to grow into an enduring practice, it should blend the discipline of art history with the powerful foundation of public scholarship theory and practice that has already been developed, tested, critiqued, and revised by people in other fields. To assist in that process, I propose here a theoretical and practical framework for an engaged art history that is grounded in scholarship outside of the discipline. My goal is twofold. First, I aim to offer a manageable introduction to this vast body of interdisciplinary literature. At the same time, I seek to demonstrate how connecting with scholarship from other fields can help articulate specific characteristics of and actions for engaged art history.

Many academic disciplines across the sciences, social sciences, arts, and humanities have branches that emphasize some form of public scholarship. Such work can be defined broadly as "scholarly or creative activity that joins serious intellectual endeavor with a commitment to public practice and public consequence" (Eatman 2009). The engaged art history that I describe in this chapter borrows most heavily from three main areas of study: the scholarship of engagement, anthropology, and history.

The interdisciplinary scholarship of engagement examines how higher education can fulfill its social responsibilities. The field emerged in the 1990s around calls to take service more seriously in higher education. It has since expanded to examine the range of engagement that shapes and is shaped by research, teaching, and other university activities (Sandmann 2008). It considers both practical and philosophical questions about topics such as how colleges and universities operate, whom they serve, and how partnerships that cross institutional and community borders are structured, supported, and evaluated.

Resources that come out of Anthropology also inform this framework. Several waves of reflection and change within the discipline during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have generated extensive conversations about and practices of engagement and ethical responsibility.

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In the second quarter of the twentieth century, for example, “applied anthropology” was typically structured with an expert anthropologist creating scholarship that could help a community audience. In the 1980s, the field shifted to place more emphasis on involving the community in creating, carrying out, and sharing the results of a project. While some of those shifts came from new ways of thinking within the discipline, others were prompted by communities (particularly communities of Indigenous people) who sought more control over meaning-making around their cultures. (Lamphere 2004). The ways in which anthropologists have grappled with how to work in a collaborative rather than exploitive manner with the people whose cultures are topics of study may be particularly informative for art historians who also study aspects of cultural heritage.

Like anthropology, history is another discipline in which scholars have taken deliberate steps to examine and expand public engagement. Their work forms a third crucial component of this study. Public history emerged as a formal field in the 1970s, although the practice of historians working outside of academia dates back much further (see Grele 1981). Public history, oral history, and local history have generated ways of interpreting the past alongside and in partnership with stakeholders – ideas and techniques that can serve the art historian well.

Rather than construct an exhaustive review of the literature related to public scholarship, I have harvested elements that are especially germane to engaged art history. Sources from history and anthropology are particularly useful because of existing intersections between art history and those disciplines. For example, all three areas of study have well-established practices of connecting primary sources and scholarship with publics through museums. To an extent, we are already in dialogue with each other around collecting, exhibition, and interpretation practices. But history and anthropology have other highly developed subfields that focus on engagement, while their counterparts in art history are only beginning to cohere. Our disciplinary neighbors have much to offer engaged art history in this relatively nascent stage of its development.

A Note on Naming

Starting with how we name our work, we can learn from other fields that have grappled with similar questions before. Finding the right language to describe scholarship that connects with people and practices outside of academia is tricky (Ellison 2013). Depending on the discipline, the methods, and the theoretical underpinning, this type of work might be called *applied*, *community-based*, *engaged*, *participatory*, or something else entirely. Instead of parsing nuanced definitions, I use terms such as *public scholarship* and *engaged scholarship* interchangeably. *Engaged art history* is an umbrella term that encompasses “the numerous ways in which art historians who pursue public scholarship connect with a range of audiences, partners, social issues, ethical priorities, institutions, and more” (Holzman 2019).

In art history, engaged scholars are just starting to form a community of practice. As we come together, we should follow the recommendation that anthropologist Louise Lamphere (2004) made to her colleagues regarding public scholarship in anthropology: We can find strength by emphasizing our shared values, techniques, and goals instead of dwelling on the ways in which our approaches to public scholarship differ from one another.

Characteristics of Engaged Art History

An engaged art history with strong interdisciplinary roots has three primary features: it is rigorous, problem-oriented, and democratic. These characteristics are common among engaged scholarship in other disciplines. They can manifest in different ways depending on the specific project at hand, but they should all be present in a robust practice of engaged art history.

It is rigorous.

Like any high quality scholarship, engaged art history must be grounded in solid theory and methods in order to be effective. Like any form of responsible engaged scholarship, its guiding theories and methods must draw from both its disciplinary base and the scholarship of engagement (Jordan 2007, Wood et al. 2016). Engaged art history is not art history lite. Quite the contrary: it is double strength, guided by two skillful practices: art history and engagement.

It is problem-oriented.

Engaged art history involves a shift in perspective. In traditional academic work, the research question or the learning objective typically puts discipline-specific content at the center of activity. In contrast, engaged art history begins with the goal of addressing problems that are bigger than the discipline itself. It seeks to improve individual, social, and/or ecological well-being through the study or practice of art history.

Various fields have adopted a problem-oriented approach to public scholarship (Holland et al. 2010). Anthropologist Barbara Rose Johnston summarized one common inflection of this practice as "working *with* communities to understand and address problems of mutual concern" (2010, S235). For her and others, problem-oriented scholarship develops in collaboration with other stakeholders.

It is democratic.

Engaged art history expands who has access to art historical knowledge and who can participate in creating art history scholarship. It empowers stakeholders to engage in democratic activities – that is, "to produce the kind of community they want by working together with others" (Diebel 2016). It builds skills among its participants that strengthen democracy, such as critical thinking and the ability to talk and work across differences (Saltmarsh and Hartley 2012, Zúñiga, Lopez, and Ford 2012, Sanday 1998).

Actions for Engaged Art History

To achieve the key characteristics of engaged art history, scholars can adopt several approaches that have become common in other engaged disciplines. As demonstrated throughout this book (as well as in other sources), there are already art historians who employ these practices of engagement. In order to keep the emphasis on the interdisciplinary literature, I do not discuss such examples in this chapter.

1. Pursue shared authority.

As engaged art historians, we must approach our work with the understanding that the power to determine meaning does not rest solely with the academically trained scholar. Instead, it is held among stakeholders who include scholars as well as people who have knowledge derived from

their lived experience, their professional practice, or their cultural heritage. Pursuing shared authority means starting with this mindset and developing projects in ways that respect different types of expertise. It is a fundamental element of public scholarship (Espinosa 2018).

While the term "shared authority" comes from oral history, the concept has counterparts in other fields and disciplines. Popularized by Michael Frisch (1990, 2011), the term reflects the notion that in an interview, both parties – the interviewer who poses questions and the interviewee who chooses how to answer them – contribute to the meaning-making process. In anthropology there is a long history of collaborating with stakeholders. Ethnographers work together with people in the community that is the subject of study, relying on those contributors' expertise to inform the research (Lassiter 2005). In museum practice, shared authority has come to mean involving stakeholders in activities such as determining exhibition topics, interpreting content, and informing collection management decisions. It also includes creating structured experiences in exhibition contexts that encourage visitors to bring their own knowledge to what they encounter in the gallery (Adair, Filene, and Koloski 2011).

A meaning-making practice rooted in shared authority encourages collaboration among stakeholders. It is widely recognized that "one of the defining characteristics of contemporary models of civic engagement is mutually-beneficial collaboration, in which all persons contribute knowledge, skills, and experience in determining the issues to be addressed, the questions to be asked, the problems to be resolved, the strategies to be used, the outcomes that are considered desirable, and the indicators of success" (Bringle, Clayton, and Price 2009, 1). Partners can work together at any stage of a project, from determining a research question to communicating findings.

In engaged art history those partnerships can take on a number of forms. They might bring together artists and scholars, university workers and museum workers, art history experts and neighborhood groups, professors and government entities, or art historians and professionals from other areas such as law, medicine, or urban planning. When particularly robust, these collaborations shift the work from something that we do *for* audiences to something that we do *with* partners.

Pursuing shared authority promotes democratic solutions because it empowers people to make meaning for themselves. As Ronald Grele noted in a foundational 1981 essay, "the task of the public historian, broadly defined, should be to help members of the public do their own history and to aid them in understanding their role in shaping and interpreting events" (48-49). The work Grele describes necessarily involves people whose perspectives have been historically and structurally omitted from scholarly meaning-making. Writing about collaborative anthropology, Luke Eric Lassiter discussed how ethnographers working with Indigenous groups involved representatives of those groups at various stages of the research process. In addition to serving as ethnographic consultants, directly shaping the content of a study as it develops, stakeholders have formed editorial committees that review entire manuscripts or provide feedback on specific portions of research (Lassiter 2005).

In engaged art history, pursuing shared authority also requires honoring ways of thinking about art, visual culture, and the past that might differ from the techniques and values that are typically

taught in graduate programs. This means listening to and looking alongside partners who have personal authority to speak about an artwork but who may have been excluded from institutions of higher education or professional art/history circles. Approaching scholarship from a position that asks people with these perspectives to share *their* authority with us can center engaged art history around the understanding that academic expertise is important, but it is more meaningful when put into conversation with other value and knowledge systems.

2. Build relationships.

Engaged scholarship relies on relationships. These relationships involve collaborating participants as well as people who facilitate the work without directly creating it. These can include (but are not limited to) funders, community leaders, administrators, advisors, and members of the government. While new projects may spark new relationships, it can be particularly valuable to build and cultivate relationships over time.

Relationships come in different forms. They can exist among individuals, communities, or institutions. They can be strong, weak, or somewhere in between. Engaged scholars should pursue equitable relationships, which may require working hard to correct preexisting inequities. Robert Bringle, Patti Clayton, and Mary Price have differentiated types of relationships along a continuum from "emergent or underdeveloped" to "transformational" (2009). Underdeveloped relationships primarily involve sharing information, while transformational relationships – "characterized by closeness, equity, and integrity," (4) – involve sharing resources and goals. If the flow of information and ideas is unidirectional in underdeveloped relationships, in transformational relationships it is multidirectional.

The strongest relationships are rooted in trust, and trust takes time to achieve. Simply being present in a community can go a long way toward that goal. As anthropologist Holly Cusack-McVeigh has stated, "what matters most in the work we do is what matters most to the community, and… you only gain these understandings by spending time in the community and learning how to listen to what people say about what matters" (2015-2016, 51).

In an essay about engagement in the humanities, Gregory Jay argues that "while we should not abandon limited-term projects, programs should strive to engage communities in ways that create long-term partnerships" (Jay 2012, 59). He advocates for projects that span multiple semesters, suggesting that students from different courses can contribute to the work while the relationship between university and community partners deepens. On a practical level, given the enormous amount of work involved in starting a collaborative project, he suggests that long-term partnerships may also be more efficient than one-off activities. Additionally, he notes that funding may be more readily available for the types of projects that dig deeper and have longer durations.

Scholars have developed a variety of methods and models to document and evaluate relationships and their quality (e.g. Bandy et al. 2018, Bringle, Clayton, and Price 2009). Mapping relationships and other assets can be an important part of preparing for or critically reflecting on an engaged project (e.g. Jay 2012). To support strong, equitable collaborations, some scholars recommend establishing explicit agreements (e.g. Menzies 2001) or formal contracts (e.g. Johnston 2010) that articulate expectations among project partners.

3. Embrace activism and advocacy.

Many scholars who adopt engaged practices have a desire to work toward social justice (O'Meara 2008). Instead of attempting to separate their advocacy and activism from their scholarly identity, they deliberately integrate them into their professional academic work. Some make their integrated identity explicit by calling themselves a "scholar-activist" or "scholar-advocate" (Woodward 2009). For these scholars, pursuing social justice is an ethical imperative that lies at the heart of public scholarship (e.g. Kezar, Drivalas, and Kitchen 2018, Huerta 2018, Billard 2019). Incorporating activism and advocacy into academic work supports a rigorous, problem-oriented, and democratic practice. It puts scholarship directly in the service of increasing equity and uses the power of research and academic resources to support positive social change. Through our scholarship we can advocate for our partners' interests, needs, and goals – many of which may be issues that we care deeply about, too.

We can draw strength for our own activism and advocacy by looking to the way it has become a vital aspect of other disciplines. In public history, scholars have recently started to reclaim and reexamine their field's roots in activism (Meringolo 2017, Jennings 2017). Their work adds greater dimension to Grele's description of good public history as "a weapon in the arsenal of those who struggle for social change"(1981, 48). Engaged art history can be that, too.

But leveraging art history for social change will also require contending with the ways in which our discipline is embedded in and indebted to the very power structures that produce (or at least uphold) the inequities we would seek to correct. It is no secret, for example, that a substantial portion of our discipline has been dedicated to studying and celebrating art championed by wealthy patrons and others with cultural power – whether in the historical moment that the artwork was made or in more recent collecting and exhibition contexts. Any activism or advocacy in art history must look inward to our discipline and its related institutions as well as outward to the other communities we serve.

It is worth remembering that, especially around matters of activism and advocacy, the culture of a discipline can change. For example, in 1998 Peggy Reeves Sanday challenged attendees at the American Anthropological Association to embrace, rather than downplay, their interests in "social justice, human rights, and democratic ideals." Over the course of the following decade, they did. When Setha Low and Sally Engle Merry reviewed the field in 2010, they identified activism and advocacy as prominent elements of Engaged Anthropology. As archaeologist Claire Smith commented in response to Low and Merry's work, "the critical change is a movement from archaeology plus engagement to archaeology as engagement. While the aims of the former are primarily archaeological, the aims of the latter are primarily social or political" (2010). Engaged art historians can similarly flip the focus in our field.

4. Work locally.

Given the global scope of art history's subject matter and the way that many institutions reward scholars for building international reputations, working locally may seem like a difficult prospect. But connecting with the communities near where we live or work is important – and it can contribute to a strong engaged practice.

Working locally does not exclusively mean studying the visual culture and history of the places where we are based. It can also mean connecting with the expertise and interests that reside in our nearby communities. Engaged scholars can activate their research about other cultures to connect with relevant local issues and audiences. For example, someone with expertise in the history of sustainable housing in Scandinavia could share that knowledge to support the development of sustainable housing in another part of the world (Walker-Andrews 2014). Engaged scholars can also work with nearby descendant communities – people who may have familial and cultural connections to the scholar's topic of study – in order to gain a deeper and, in some cases, more responsible understanding of their subject matter. For example, as Stephen W. Silliman and T. J. Ferguson have explained, archaeologists "have an ethical mandate to consult with the descendants of the people who lived in the archaeological sites we investigate" (Silliman and Ferguson 2010, 48).

There are practical benefits to working locally. If building relationships is important to engaged scholarship, it may be more feasible to build those relationships close by. Geographic proximity can make it easier to meet, sustain relationships, and conduct research. For projects where students are involved, a local connection may enable students to recognize (or more readily learn) political, geographic, and historical nuances that affect the particular issue at hand (e.g. Holzman, Labode, and Kryder-Reid forthcoming).

Beyond that, working locally can help scholars "become rooted in a place, rather than perching unconnected and uninvolved" (Kammen 1995, 3). In other words, what we learn from participating in a local project can help us better understand and, potentially, become more invested in the communities that surround us, even if that additional involvement occurs outside of the scope of our professional practice. It can also help scholars feel more deeply connected to their disciplinary practice. As Barbara Rose Johnston explained regarding "backyard" anthropology, "the close distance between engagement and outcome allows a stronger sense of responsibility and understanding of the social impact of doing anthropology" (2010, S238).

When conducted responsibly – that is, in a manner that is rigorous, problem-oriented, and democratic – local scholarship can additionally mitigate previous institutional wrongs. Interpreting collection objects in light of relevant local issues can be a way to welcome in audiences that were previously excluded from a museum. Research and teaching that occur in dialogue with nearby people and places can help colleges and universities atone for recent or historical contributions to – among other things – gentrification, displacement, the institution of slavery, or removing indigenous people from their land.

For example, my university, IUPUI, has a fraught history with people who live or have lived in the area where the campus is located. As the university expanded during the second half of the twentieth century, it contributed to displacing residents from an historic African American neighborhood that once thrived on the site that is now IUPUI's campus. Many of my colleagues have studied this history and generated scholarship that examines local issues relevant to this difficult past (e.g. Hyatt and Mullins , Labode 2014, Mullins and White 2010). In doing so, they have extended an arm that offers up the university as a resource for Indianapolis and the people who were overlooked or outright dismissed in the university's previous actions. This type of

work will not correct past wrongs, but acknowledging these wrongs is necessary. And, recognizing how the university is indebted to its local environment and the people who live or have lived there may help prevent future abuses.

5. *Teach.*

Teaching is a particularly multifaceted action for engaged scholarship. Here I focus in particular on pedagogy as a form of engagement.

The field of education has its own rich history of teaching to strengthen democracy and pursue social justice (e.g. Freire 1993 [1973], Dewey 1916). Engaged scholars can contribute to these goals by teaching within and beyond university settings. Many universities offer extension programs that serve learners outside of degree-granting programs at the school. Programs like these have been a staple of public engagement initiatives in higher education (e.g. Franz and Garst 2015, Boyte 2015). Other university-sponsored programs, such as UC Irvine's Humanities Out There, bring graduate and undergraduate students into K-12 classrooms, where they connect young learners with scholarship in ways that strengthen their capacity for critical thinking and, in turn, democratic participation (Lupton 2008). Outside of formal university programs, engaged scholars can teach a course hosted by a community group, train docents at a nearby museum, or write for an audience that is not limited to scholars and their students.

Even in university classrooms today it is not uncommon for teachers to involve their students in rigorous, problem-oriented, collaborative, and democratic work. Service learning initiatives, for example, encourage faculty members to help their students meet course learning objectives by completing projects that directly meet the needs of a community partner (e.g. Jacoby 2015).

As many have noted, if scholars are going to involve students in publicly engaged work, we must train them appropriately (e.g. Jay 2012, Lamphere 2004, Kelley 1978). That, of course, means giving them a solid foundation in the disciplinary knowledge relevant to the work that they are doing. But it also means making sure that they are sensitive to matters such as "race, class, and gender studies; white privilege; principles of organization based in mutuality; cultural identity theory; local history; techniques for reflection, etc. This may not be the kind of knowledge emphasized in, or even covered by the usual training or normative scholarship in the discipline" (Jay 2012, 58). As art historians, we are fortunate that our discipline does prepare students to think meaningfully about many of the topics that Jay identifies. We are already preparing our students for some of these aspects of engaged scholarship – perhaps it is not a huge jump, then, to take them a step further and teach other tools for engagement. Furthermore, in a highly visual and media-based society, the skills of close looking, visual analysis, and critical interpretation – all central components of training in art history – are deeply relevant to the task of strengthening democracy.

6. *Connect the work back to institutional and disciplinary responsibility.*

Engaged scholarship necessarily reaches beyond the typical borders of our institutions and, at times, our disciplines. Even so, it is simultaneously important to recognize the ways in which engaged scholarship benefits those entities. Engaged scholarship can help our institutions and our discipline become more inclusive, support stronger communities, promote democratic values, and address intractable problems. As art historians, our institutions are likely to be

museums and universities – institutions with undeniable social responsibilities that engaged scholarship can help them fulfill.

As scholar of engagement Scott Peters has noted, engaged scholarship upholds a responsibility for higher education that was articulated by the presidential commission on higher education in 1948: to "be the carrier of democratic values, ideals, and processes" (Truman Commission on Higher Education in Peters 2010, v). Beyond this overarching point, many colleges and universities are adding civic engagement to their mission and core values. By adopting engaged practices, art historians directly help further our schools' goals.

Like universities, museums have a social responsibility that engaged scholarship supports. In the most straightforward sense, museums, as places of informal learning, are already involved in presenting scholarship to audiences whose expertise lies elsewhere. But in today's robust landscape of scholarship on engagement, presenting content alone is not enough. To truly serve their varied audiences, museums must cultivate long-term relationships with stakeholders and work with those groups at different stages of the exhibition development process so that they make meaning with instead of for their visitors. The field is shifting to become more inclusive (e.g. Janes and Sandell 2019). Engaged art history can support this change.

It is important for engaged art historians to stress these features when we report on our work and submit it for evaluation. Connecting engaged scholarship back to the institution's mission and vision keeps the work grounded, but it also paves the way for expanding engaged art history by demonstrating the value of what we do – not just for the partners we work with but also for the institutions that are more often than not in a position of establishing policies and practices that make it feasible or unfeasible for us to do this work.

Conclusion

In art history we have longstanding practices of public engagement through curatorial work, art criticism, and university teaching. But we are relatively new to practices of co-creating and shared authority, and we are only starting to come together as a community of engaged scholars to share methods and ideas. As we develop an engaged art history, we must recognize that we are not alone in our commitment to public scholarship or the challenges we face as we pursue it. Learning from other disciplines with well-developed practices of public scholarship will help engaged art history flourish.

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